

# A MISSIONARY'S JOURNEY THROUGH LAOS FROM BANGKOK TO ÜBON.

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AM glad to be able to communicate to the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society some notes made by a Missionary on his way from Bangkok to Übon to convert the Laos tribes.

Missionaries penetrate gradually and from different directions into the midst of these savage tribes, and try to convert them to Christianity. The story of what occurred among the wild Ba-huars, an independent tribe on the West of Cochin-China near the 14° lat. N. and 106° long. E. (Paris), is well known. In the beginning of 1884 five Missionaries were murdered by brigands while they were engaged in establishing a Mission among the Chau tribe in the West of Tonquin.

For some time past the Mission in Siam has maintained a Station at Übon, near 15° 20' N. lat. and 102° 30' E. long. (Paris) on the Seimoun, a tributary of the Mekong. It is the Narrative of a Missionary on his way to Übon which I have now the pleasure of communicating.

N. C.

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It is not a carefully composed narrative that I propose to give you, but simply a journal kept from day to day, written often by the light of a torch, or of the setting sun, when, tired by the day's march, we had pitched our camp for the night. In order to take the place of Père RONDEL, invalidated, I started with

Père XAVIER GUÉGO, who had already been for two years a Missionary in Laos. We bought in Bangkok such things as were absolutely necessary, these being of an exorbitant price among the Chinese of Laos, viz., cotton goods, thread, cooking utensils, medicines, etc. On Septuagesima Monday, the 11th of February, 1884, two boats loaded with luggage took their departure for Thakien, four days' journey N. E. of Bangkok. The following Thursday we were at Thakien, where the inhabitants entertained us during the few days employed in preparing the carts to be used on our journey. These carts were the same which had brought down our *confrères* from Laos a few days before. On Wednesday, the 20th February, the carts started; we followed a few hours later, and overtook them, and halted at mid-day at the village of Ban-seng. This village is at the entrance of the forest, which we were not to leave again after this point. There is nothing but one immense forest, in some places very dense, in others relieved by clearings in the midst of which villages are scattered about. It is a thick wood, through which passes a road just broad enough for a cart, there is not room for a man either on the right or on the left. Here and there one comes across a clearing. It must not be supposed that the road is free from obstructions; now it is a deep rut which nobody fills up, now it is an enormous root which blocks up part of the road-way and which has to be crossed at the risk of seeing the cart smashed into a thousand pieces. We advanced in this way with our ten carts and relays of bullocks, which either followed or preceded us by a short distance. Sometimes a wheel would lose its spokes, and sometimes an axle would break (these axles are merely bars of some tough wood which go through the wheels and have to be renewed frequently).

At last, about 9 o'clock, we reached a muddy pool and pitched our camp on its banks. This consisted in arranging the carts in a large circle, in the centre of which the bullocks and horses were tethered to stakes driven into the ground. Their drivers spread their mats on the grass under the carts and passed the night there. As for ourselves, we had manufactured two little tents which we set up between two carts. Large fires, fed with fuel by watchmen who mounted

guard armed with muskets, were a safeguard against wild beasts and robbers.

*Thursday, 21st.*—Daylight had hardly appeared when I wakened the camp and rang to prayers. Then each made his way to the cart that served as our kitchen, to swallow a cup of tea, while waiting for breakfast, which might be a long time coming, for it was necessary first to reach the regular halting-place, otherwise no water was to be got. The bullocks were yoked, and we started—my *confrère*, on horseback, leading the way, while I brought up the rear in order to keep an eye upon stragglers. After an hour's march, there was a sudden halt, and I went from one cart to another asking what was the matter. Each had stopped because the one in front of it had stopped! It turned out that a wheel was broken, the damage was repaired with rattan, and we went on again. About mid-day we stopped near a pool and cooked our breakfast, while the bullocks, unyoked, cropped the fresh herbage. We were at the village of Ramachai, but we were in want of a spare felloe, for which we sought in vain. Our people went off to the Laosian village of Ban-kula and thence brought back the piece of wood that we wanted. We then set off. The route here was over loose, white sand, which made it very heavy travelling for the bullocks. In the evening we reached two muddy marshes; here, at the pool known as Nong-pi-ieng, we camped.

*Friday, 22nd.*—Towards the evening we arrived at a small village—a group of little huts built upon piles in the middle of an enclosure formed of felled timber. We did not halt here, for the water was not good and the custom-house of Muang Sanam is only a kilomètre further on and there is a good spring there.

The mention of a “custom-house” is calculated to make you suppose that we were approaching a collection of houses protected by a military station. But in this country a *douane* is a much more simple affair. No registers, no commissioners! Two men sprawling peacefully in a hut of leaves await, at the frontier of a province, the passage of cart and bullocks, and levy a tax on the owners.

*Saturday, 23rd.*—A short stage. Busy preparing an altar.

*Sunday, 24th.*—Mass. We camped in the evening on the banks of a torrent, which is nearly dry in this season.

*Monday, 25th.*—We found in the evening on the surface of the ground a kind of iron ore which the most intelligent of our followers called “stone of Bien-hoa.” This substance seems to me to be somewhat curious; it looks as if it were formed of little globules of iron, or like the slag which is taken from a furnace after smelting. Blocks of this stone are found at distant intervals, quite isolated one from the other. We camped near a little torrent.

*Tuesday, 26th.*—We started again, crossing the stream Huai Khai, and met four bullock-carts accompanied by some Siamese. This is the first time for five days that we have come across any human being.

*Wednesday, 27th.*—We had to cross the river Sakéo, which never dries up, and the bed of which is at the bottom of a deep ravine and is disfigured with stakes and snags.

The descent was negotiated, and we crossed over and halted for breakfast. Four or five Burmese caravans were encamped not far from us, and in another direction a party of Cambodians. These people had come from the provinces of Sourin and Sisaket to buy gambier, which they eat with the betel-leaf and areca-nut. They had been here for more than a week and had not yet been able to make their purchases, owing to their not having complied with some formality or other insisted on by the local authorities. While we took our meal, we received several visits. The first to come was a judge from the town of Amnet, twelve leagues from Ubón, who was on his way to Bangkok, and was good enough to take charge of a short note to Monseigneur VEY giving him news of us. By degrees all these folks disappeared on their way south, in the direction by which we had come. About 2 o'clock we too started. We had been on the march for about three quarters of an hour when we reached the custom-house of Sakéo, which is situated on the side of a road as large and straight as ours in Europe. It goes from the province of

Kabin to Battambang. Constructed originally by a Phya (high Siamese official) to secure easy communication with the Cambodian provinces subject to Siam, this road might be of the greatest use to travellers. But since the date of its construction it has not received any repairs whatever, and the forest therefore is taking possession of it again. In this very year (1884) a telegraph line has been erected along this road, over its entire length, by the agency of Frenchmen from Saigon (this line goes from Saigon to Bangkok). In the evening we camped at a pool called Nong Salika. A caravan of Chinese traders from Sourin had established themselves before our arrival, and among them was the nephew of an old Chinese Christian whom I had known at Bangkok. He was travelling towards Kabin to sell skins, silk, etc., and intended to bring back with him cloth, hardware, etc. His correspondent at Kabin being a Christian, I entrusted him with a second letter for Bangkok.

*Thursday, 28th.*—At 3 p. m. we reached the frontier of the province of Vathana. We were all fasting, and we established ourselves in the sheds which had been built for the workmen employed on the telegraph line. Night had already fallen when we heard the sound of a band of men advancing in our direction. Père XAVIER got up to see what was happening, and saw a black mass a few feet in front of him. "Who goes there?" "Phra Aphai." Torches were bought and Père XAVIER then saw that the black mass was an elephant of the largest size followed by two smaller ones. The travellers were in search of a lodging for the night, and as there still remained one large shed unoccupied, they settled themselves down in that.

*Friday, 29th.*—To-day we rested, and watched at our leisure the travellers of last night. Their chief is a Cambodian mandarin subordinate to Siam. Of the three elephants which he had with him, two were intended for the King of Siam as presents.

The mandarin came to pay us a visit, and informed us of the object of his journey. He is, he said, the son of Phya Anuphat (a high official) and the second mandarin of the Province

of Siem-rab. In return for the elephants which he was going to offer to the King, he hoped for certain favours. We paid a visit to the Governor, for whom we had brought letters from Bangkok. His house is a tumble-down affair. He is of Laosian race, about sixty years old, and has under his government about two or three hundred houses scattered about in the forest, the population of which is Cambodian.

*Saturday, 1st March.*—For the last time we crossed the telegraph line, which we then quitted in order to take the road to Nong-bua (pool of Lokas). At one o'clock we resumed our journey, and camped in the evening at the village of Bang-sang inhabited by Laosians.

*Sunday, 2nd.*—Our itinerary instructed us to go by Nong-phi, and Tong-nong—two pools which are close to the roadside—but the dryness of the weather obliged us to take another course, viz., by Ban-kin. Starting at half-past two, we travelled through forest, everything being most distressingly dry; at night we slept in the forest, the bullocks having to go without water. Our rice was cooked with the little which we had in reserve.

*Monday, 3rd.*—At ten o'clock we arrived at Ban-kin. Water good and abundant. At two o'clock the signal for departure was given, but two bullocks were missing and had to be recovered. We got away at last. Road bad. On the left a chain of mountains of considerable height was observable. At night we camped on the banks of a pool.

*Tuesday, 4th.*—Excellent water in the morning, muddy water in the evening.

*Wednesday, 5th.*—In the evening we arrived at the village of Huari-Sameron and pushed on to Kra-sa-mëmai, where we passed the night in the middle of a field.

*Thursday, 6th.*—Early in the morning the headman of the village visited us at our camp, and brought us the provisions which we had asked for the night before on our arrival. These consisted of rice, fowls and red chillies. We were able also to procure here an additional cart for eleven ticals; this extra assistance was absolutely necessary, for we were ap-

proaching a chain of mountains which we should have to cross in order to reach the plateau of Ubon. About half past four we emerged in an extensive clearing covered with reeds which were still green ; we judged that we should here find the water we wanted so much, and we found accordingly a clear and abundant supply.

*Friday, 7th.*—We reached Puthai-saman at a tolerably early hour. Puthai-saman was formerly an important town, or perhaps rather an imposing temple erected to the worship of Buddha. It is one of those monuments of Cambodia which are so much renowned, and which astonish all travellers by their original and beautiful architecture. These monuments indicate the existence, among the people who conceived and carried them out, of a very advanced degree of civilization. We were tempted to inspect one of these precious specimens of the architecture of the *Khmers*, as savants would say.

It was not more than eight o'clock when we reached the east gate of the ruined city, which is flanked on its four sides by an enormous moat filled with water, the breadth of which is at least from thirty to forty mètres. The sides of the moat are composed of enormous blocks of Bien-hoa stone and have a slope of about forty-five degrees. Everything was hidden from view by large trees, creepers, shrubs, and high grass which have taken possession of the locality. We camped outside the east gate. While breakfast was being got ready, I penetrated into the middle of the ruins. I shall not undertake to give a very exact description of them. This has already been done by the numerous learned travellers who have written about the ruins of Angkor-vat and Angkor-lom. The plan, the buildings, the details, are the same in all. Everything has been reproduced, down to the smallest piece of carving. These ruins differ one from another only in area. Puthai-saman seems to be Angkor-vat on a reduced scale.

Follow me then step by step through the midst of colossal statues lying on the ground, stepping over a fragment of fallen wall, or a tree lying prostrate on the ruins. I reached the east gate by an immense causeway or bridge spanning the moat which I have just mentioned. On both sides, and an-

swering the purpose of parapets, there are colossal statues of Siva, seated, and with the head turned three-quarters-face towards the traveller as he advances. Nothing is left of these now but the pedestals, the various parts lying on the ground or in the moat. I measured, out of curiosity, a fragment of one of these statues from the lower lip to the top of the head ; the measurement was 0m.60, with a distance of 0m.50 from one ear to the other. A few paces further on I found the neck and upper part of the chest of the same statue, this fragment being deeply embedded in the ground. The designs with which the neck and chest are ornamented, are executed with much delicacy, and have resisted the ravages of time. This causeway must be that which they call the bridge, or the gate, of the giants. At the end of it there is a thick wall, in the middle of which is a gateway adorned with sculptures, and grotesque monsters. A little further on is seen a little building which gives one the idea of a chapel.

It is a tolerably broad corridor pierced with windows on the side facing south. These windows are fitted with bars of rounded stone, each being of a different shape or pattern. The vaulted roof, which is somewhat of the ogival shape, is entirely of hewn stones one placed over the other. Looking closely at the structure, no trace of timber, lime, or iron is to be seen in the walls, all the blocks are fitted together, and placed one on the other. The blocks are enormous, ten men could hardly lift one of them. A sculptured ornament occupies the centre of the vault. In the middle of the building, on a pile of stones, pious visitors have deposited a statue of Buddha seated on snakes, the heads of which spread out like a fan behind him. The whole building is of pyramidal shape.

Between the eastern and southern gates, there is an immense wall about 40 or 50 mètres in length, and 3 or 4 mètres in height, the inner surface of which is entirely covered with bas-reliefs relating probably to the fabulous births of Buddha. These sculptures are still in good preservation. It would seem that this series of sculptures used to be protected by a covered gallery, which has fallen down, and the ruins of which lie about the base of the wall where the explanatory inscription ought to be found. I reached the southern gate ;

it is now nothing more than an enormous heap of ruins on which trees and creepers grow at pleasure. It was in the midst of these that I made these hasty notes. Several doors and windows, however, were to be seen, appearing out of the ruins. I sounded all the parts of these. Returning to the southern gate, I continued to follow the long wall of bas-reliefs. Here the direction in which the figures are walking changed. On the wall which terminates at the southern gate they were walking towards the East ; now they were advancing towards the West. This southern gate—I speak of the inner erection which must have been the palace, or a great temple raised in honour of Buddha—furnishes access to four porticoes of colossal proportions, the roofs of all being composed of enormous blocks of stone shaped and placed one on the other. I continued to climb over the blocks lying about in all directions, and I reached a series of galleries in sufficiently good preservation to allow one to judge of the general plan. Here, as in almost all similar buildings of the races of Indo-China, the outside is generally finished while the inside, on the contrary, is hardly commenced. Is this intentional, or was the work abandoned before it was completed ? Many savants are of the latter opinion. The gallery which I traversed is in the shape of a cross ; it joins other galleries, the point of intersection being in all cases topped by a dome or a pyramid. In one of the doorways, there was still to be seen a frame of carved wood partly destroyed by white ants and exposure. In the opposite doorway, there is also a little fragment, but these were the only traces of wood I could find. In a small inner court near the doors and windows, there are statues of Siva let into the wall ; the figure wears a diadem on its head, and holds a lotus in one hand, and a garland or snake in the other. The neck is ornamented with a phallus, and the feet with two rings. Beyond this court, a pyramid rises above a doorway ; the stones are so put together as to form the features of a fabulous personage. This figure is repeated on all four sides. At the present time only one remains, all the others have fallen down.

In front of the south gate and spanning an inner moat, there is a large causeway, not so long as the one outside the main enclosure, which is bordered by fragments of a balustrade

like those of Angkor-vat, a long dragon supported on the knees of a whole row of seated statues ; these have the legs crossed and one of the hands under one thigh.

After two hours spent in crossing these ruins, I endeavoured to make a plan of all that I had seen. This city or temple is built according to regular bearings, and forms a complete square.

On the four sides, each facing one of the cardinal points, enormous causeways thrown across a broad and deep moat gave access to the inner side of the outer wall. In front of these gateways, about three or four mètres from the moat, and as if intended to protect the entrance, there were square enclosures, provided with a single door, above which rose a pile of cruciform buildings topped by pyramids.

The inner buildings, which it would be difficult to describe, were surrounded by a second ditch, less broad and deep than the first. There were four gates magnificently sculptured and defended, as it were, by monstrous figures with human bodies and hideous faces—regular demons. The general mass of buildings was composed of galleries all connected one with another and crowned with domes at the points where they crossed ; these domes were more and more lofty in proportion as they approached the centre, the middle one towering above all the others. The coping of all the walls, whether inner or outer, is formed of little *sema* (mounds) \* in the middle of which is a Buddha seated. The large moat is kept abundantly supplied with water from two little streams.

*Saturday, 8th.*—It was with regret that we quitted these ruins. Who can tell us their story ? What has become of those who built this city ? Learned authorities are reduced to conjectures. The people of the country can furnish nothing but fabulous legends ; according to them, these buildings are the work of the angels. After a troublesome journey through dense forest we camped on the banks of a muddy pool.

*Sunday, 9th.*—After breakfast Père XAVIER went ahead to purchase provisions and to hire men and carts to enable us to

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\* *Sema*, the sign by which a grave is known ; a mound, a barrow.

cross the mountain. In two days we shall be there; the village of Phra Sat Sing, towards which we are advancing, is the last which we shall pass before arriving at the range. We passed the night under some large sheds, built to accommodate a white elephant which is to be brought down from Bassai to Bangkok. I went to look for water, and found a pool; a wolf made off as I approached, leaving the carcase of a deer almost intact. This was at once flayed, and the meat spread out in the sun to be dried and salted. Père XAVIER then came in, having obtained the promise of two additional carts.

Not far from Phra Sat Sing is a very ancient ruined pagoda. Local tradition makes it co-eval with the erection of Phuthaisaman, partly because of the similarity of the building materials in the two places, and partly because of certain carvings. This ruin did not seem to me to present any great interest.

*Monday, 10th.*—A journey under difficulties. The bullocks were vicious, the wheels came to grief, the spare cattle went astray and had to be hunted up, the rice was left behind in one of the carts which was in the rear, etc., etc. Evening saw us at Huai-pha-sai-tia.

*Tuesday, 11th.*—A pleasant journey. Père XAVIER was lost, but turned up again safely.

*Wednesday, 12th.*—At 8 o'clock we commenced the ascent. The little range of hills which we had to cross is neither high nor broad, the highest point does not exceed probably 200 mètres, and a good walker could easily get across in four or five hours. But the road is something indescribable, a perfect goat's path; the carts had to follow it, nevertheless. We tackled it accordingly, dragging the carts, one by one, from one boulder to another, by main force. At about 2 o'clock we had got over about 200 mètres of road and had attained an elevation of about 50 mètres. A good meal awaited the labourers, and all did justice to it; the bullocks were sent to graze at the foot of the hills. In the evening, we continued our journey, following a little valley which led to another hill, which may be considered as one of the peaks of the pass over which we crossed. We passed the night at the top of this.

*Thursday, 13th.*—After crossing a ravine, we gained the plateau beyond. We were about to push on to the top, when a Cambodian caravan, consisting of thirty carts, on its way from Sourin to Battambang, came in sight on the only road. We passed the night on the road.

*Friday, 14th.*—After the morning's stage, we halted on the banks of a pool. Another Cambodian caravan, composed of twenty carts, passed close to us. This one came from Sourin and was bound for Nakhon Siemrab in Cambodia, on the banks of the Touli-sap (great lake) to buy fish.

We reached the plateau of Korat, all the chief difficulties being passed. About one o'clock we were able to camp for the night under the sheds prepared for the white elephant. In the evening another train of Cambodians passed, coming from Korat and going to buy fish at Siemrab.

*Saturday, 15th.*—After great difficulty in renewing our stores of provisions, we started and passed through the village of Ban Kham. The road passes through an open undulating country. The forest has been cleared over a great stretch of ground, and there is an extensive view. Towards the East, a hill was visible, which is probably a portion of the range which we had just left. The soil was now less dry, and we came across numerous springs, some of which were ferruginous. It was still broad daylight when we entered Ulok. We pitched our tent close to that place.

*Sunday, 16th.*—A day of rest. Splendid pasture.

*Monday, 17th.*—We left the village of Ulok at dawn. Beautiful vegetation was on all sides of us. If the country were not so often harried by bands of ruffians, numerous villages might exist here comfortably. On our left, we passed one of many abandoned villages. Robbers had carried off everything, and had then set fire to it. We reached Ban-nai-mut and then Ban-khu, making the latter our halting-place.

*Tuesday, 18th.*—We passed through the village of Bak-tran, halting at night at Ban-dai.

*Wednesday, 19th.*—We skirted the village of Ban-kathum. The head-man, hearing of our approach, came to meet us in

order to warn us to keep away. Small-pox was making great ravages in the village. Detained by a storm, we passed the night in an old pagoda of the village of Tamnon.

*Thursday, 20th.*—There are still three or four more provinces through which we have to pass and then we shall reach the end of our journey. The first thing in the morning we set off in the direction of Muang Songlé, under a pelting shower of rain, and reached the shelter prepared for the white elephant, where we breakfasted. An hour's march brought us to Muang Songlé. As we left the forest, we could see the town on a slight eminence. The scene is a most charming one, the lofty stems of palms and betel-nut trees forming a perfect bouquet of verdure, while the houses are lost to view behind the leaves of bananas. We camped on the north side, occupying a building set apart for the use of travellers on the banks of a stream, whose waters fall into the Seimun, the river of Ubon.

*Friday, 21st.*—We reached the village of Ban Nong Mek. In this part of the country, numerous pines are intermingled with the forest trees. We camped at the village of Sameron.

*Saturday, 22nd.*—Our guide was to have taken us by Khan-tararum, but he missed the way, and we went by Ban Huai and Pi Nai.

*Sunday, 23rd.*—We were taken to the site of a village which had been plundered and abandoned. Here we established ourselves for a couple of days.

*Monday, 24th.*—Went out shooting green pigeons and peacocks.

*Tuesday, 25th.*—We reached Khu Khane a little before midday. Once more the building erected for accommodation of the white elephant and his attendants served as our place of shelter. Two days before, according to the inhabitants, two Europeans had halted at the same place, but from what they said I concluded that these must have been Cambodian half-castes. They came to sell opium. We passed through the village of Ban Samié and at ten o'clock at night we reached Ban Xam Lom.

*Wednesday, 26th.*—This plain is covered with numerous villages. We passed the night at Ban Pheng-puai.

*Thursday, 27th.*—We breakfasted at the village of Ban Thum. At night we travelled by torch-light. When we were within half a kilomètre of the village where we intended to sleep, a wheel of one of the carts gave away, a section of the tire and three spokes being broken. It was impossible to make the necessary repairs on the spot, so I left the cart and bullocks under the charge of three men and went on to the village with the other carts. There I had a wheel taken off one of the latter, to take the place of the broken one of the cart which had been left behind. During the night the broken wheel was repaired.

*Friday, 28th.*—We left the village of Ban Song Sang, where we had slept, with the intention of going as far as Ban Nong. We passed the *huai* (torrent) of Khajung by a large bridge built in the preceding year. The bridge was a good one, but the roadway, being formed of planks placed loosely on the cross-pieces, reminded one of the keys of a piano as the carts went over it. The road presented no difficulties, so, notwithstanding darkness, we pushed on by torchlight. At last, as our guides no longer knew the way, we camped where we were, for fear of going wrong. Our compass shewed us the blunder which the guides were making; our right course was N. E. and we were going N. W.

*Saturday, 29th.*—In the morning, after some search, we hit upon the right road, about six hundred mètres to our left. The mistake was quickly rectified, and the country being level and free from underwood, we were able to make short cuts. We passed Ban Khin and then Ban Non Noi and Ban Non Jai and slept at Ban Kho, the last village before Ubón. We slept in the midst of carts which had pulled up on the road.

*Sunday, 30th.*—This very day we were to be at Ubón! We set off in advance at a canter. In an hour we were on the banks of the Sëimun, opposite the town. The river, though very low at that time, seemed as broad as the Loire at the Pont de la Belle Croix, at Nantes. We followed the bank upstream, it being about six o'clock in the morning. Père

XAVIER pointed out to me the site of our station, but I could not make it out in consequence of the trees and bushes which cover the banks. We soon dismounted and fired several rounds. I blew a horn also. We were heard ; the children were the first to arrive, followed soon after by the grown-up people. Mass was just over when our signals announced our arrival. The two Pères came down at last ; not too robust either of them, fever having tried them severely. They procured us a boat which took us across the river with our steeds. With what joy did we embrace one another !

Our first act was to enter the humble chapel and to thank God for the protection granted to us by Him during so long a journey. Some hours later our carts arrived, and during the afternoon we conveyed them across in boats. Blessed be God for ever.

G. DABIN.

*Ubon, 30th March, 1884.*

[In their Annual Report for 1883,\* the Council of this Society made an appeal to those who are favourably placed for the purpose, to further the objects of the Society. Allusion was made to the exceptional opportunities for observation possessed by the French Missionaries in the East. The foregoing paper shews that that appeal has not been in vain and it is with great pleasure that I have performed the task of translating from the French the MS. sent to me through the Revd. N. J. COUVREUR, Procureur des Missions Étrangères at Singapore.

W. E. M.]

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\* Journal No. 12, p. xv.